



## THE REBIRTH OF IDEOLOGY

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*Ideology, ideology  
despite everything I still believe there is,  
it is passion, obsession  
of your diversity  
that at the time where it went you do not know  
where we do not know, where we do not know.*  
G. Gaber

**Abstract:** The concept of ideology appears elusive, in it are combined philosophical, political, sociological, historical, epistemological, pedagogical interpretations. This short essay tries to give an interpretation in light of the contribution offered by the reflections of Marx and hermeneutical philosophy and, especially in light of the international phenomena in the Mediterranean and Middle East and recent economic crises, it overcomes the vision of that particular current of late '900 that wanted the era of ideologies as a land no longer fertile and destined for sunset.

**Key words:** ideology, concept, Marx, hermeneutics, rebirth.

Ideologies have been among the social and cultural phenomena that have most influenced the history of the twentieth century and, until the fall of the Berlin Wall, many authors have dealt with it. After 1989, however, ideological phenomena were dismissed, on the back of the affirmation of the idea of the "incredulity towards metanarratives"<sup>1</sup> present in authors such as Lyotard<sup>2</sup>. As is well known, that of ideology is an elusive concept, in which philosophical, political, sociological, historical, epistemological interpretations converge. The

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<sup>1</sup> "Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it. To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied on it. The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements--narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive, and so on". J. F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Translation from the French by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> According to the contemporary philosopher, the reasons for the de-legitimization of metaraccons or ideologies are primarily internal: "it is first necessary to trace the seeds of" decadence "and" delegitimization "and nihilism that were already immanent to the great nineteenth-century narratives ». Both the idealistic claim to justify the value of the sciences in the context of an encyclopaedic treatment of the life of the Spirit, and the Enlightenment claim to establish a link between theory and praxis, denotative statements and prescriptive statements, prove to be bankrupt. Marxism, in turn, participates in this double failure. A second reason is of external order and resides in the events of history, which have refuted every illusion about the magnificent and progressive destiny of humanity, just think of Auschwitz. A third reason, always of an external nature, is due to the transformations of post-industrial society, connected to the take-off of capitalist technoscience and to the processes of informatization and commodification of knowledge: "Our working hypothesis is that knowledge changes the status when societies enter the so-called post-industrial age ". When the great stories fail, the problem of a new criterion of legitimacy is born. Discarded the criterion of performativity, that is of pure performance efficiency, Lyotard is inspired by the "postmodern science", which, as the post-positivist epistemology has taught us, proceeds in legitimation "for paralyzing" (ie through a free or anarchist invention of new "moves" of knowledge), reaching the conclusion that: Postmodern knowledge is a type of knowledge that, starting from heteromorph of linguistic games, is realized in a short ray plural rationality, aimed at fluid, partial and reversible legitimizations : legitimations that presuppose an exclusively local and temporary consent and that imply the maximum communication and transmission of knowledge, or the free access of citizens "to memories and databases". J.F. Lyotard, *The post-modern condition*, Milan 1981.

term "ideology" appears for the first time with Antoine Destutt de Tracy<sup>3</sup> who, following the French Revolution, intended to create a veritable branch of study to deal with ideas. He tried to determine ideals of thought and action on empirically verifiable bases, from which both the criticism of ideas and a science of ideas would be born. This initiative was entirely in line with the positivist wave that invested nineteenth-century France and which promoted confidence in the possibility of studying society through the same tools used for the natural sciences. The post-positivist age, however, did not accept the idea that the exactness and permanence that these pioneers of the codification of knowledge had cherished could be conferred to the extension of human thought and imagination. But there is a sediment that must be seriously taken into consideration: Destutt de Tracy's intentions reflect the same need shared by today's scholars of a professional and scrupulous approach to the study of ideology.

### *Limits and prays of marxist reflection*

The first who, in an authoritative manner, developed their intuition, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, set off in a very different direction. If we look at the nineteenth century, in fact, following the triumph of the bourgeoisie and class struggles, we witness a radical ideologization of every process of education<sup>4</sup>, to be considered as a time element of social control, but also of political planning and the consequent power management. Through the work "German ideology"<sup>5</sup>, Marx and Engels rebelled against the prevailing German cultural and philosophical tendencies in their time. The spiritual and romantic nature of German idealist thought, they argued, was fueled by erroneous conceptions. One of these, in an attempt to replace the correct thinking with deceptive thought, attributed an independent existence to ideas, thoughts and consciences. But in doing so, they said, German philosophers did nothing but fight against words instead of confronting the real world. As a result, philosophy clouded reality and took the form of what Marx and Engels called "ideology"<sup>6</sup>. They

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<sup>3</sup> A. L. C Destutt de Tracy. *Projet d'Elémens d'idéologie*, Paris 1801.

<sup>4</sup> P. Freire, *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power, and Liberation*, Bergin & Garvey Publishers, 1985. Original from, the University of Michigan.

<sup>5</sup> K. Marx, F. Engels, *The German ideology*, ed. C. J. Arthur, London 1974.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 4.

argued that "in all ideologies men and their conditions appear turned upside down like in a dark room"<sup>7</sup>. Through this analogy they intended to express how ideology was an inverted specular image of the material world, further distorted by the fact that the latter, under the aegis of capitalism, was in turn subject to dehumanized social relations. The role of ideology was to smooth out these contradictions by making them appear necessary, normal and congruous. In this way it was possible to maintain and strengthen social unity. Ideology was characterized as sublimation - in its various forms such as morality, religion and metaphysics - of material life.

His existence was, moreover, studded with people specialized in the mental activity of sublimation: priests who offered "salvation"<sup>8</sup> represented a precocious example of such "emancipation"<sup>9</sup> from the real world. Such diffusion could be an act of intentional manipulation, but also - especially for Engels - an unconscious or self-deception process. The ideology would therefore have been one of the manifestations of the pernicious effects of the division of labor. In this particular case, it pushed human thought to abstraction from the real world, creating pure theory, morality or philosophy in its place.

Marx and Engels added to this view on ideology a further dimension that would prove to be of particular importance. They combined the concepts of ideology and class, underlining how the ideas of the ruling classes were also characterized as dominant. The ideological illusions represented an instrument in the hands of the rulers, through the State, and were used to exercise control and dominion; indeed, to "manufacture history"<sup>10</sup> in accordance with their interests. Moreover, the filtering of interests through a container - ideology - allowed them, and to the ideology itself, to be represented as axioms in possession of universal and rational validity. This criterion of representation helped those who manipulated ideology to elaborate the myth of a unified political community, through deceptive laws, cultural orientation, "verbal masking"<sup>11</sup>, that is, power over language. The holders of control over conduct and human thought had even

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 10.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 17.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 23.

<sup>10</sup> K. Marx, F. Engels, *The German ideology*, ed. C. J. Arthur, London 1974, p. 27.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 45.

managed to convince the members of the subaltern class - the proletariat - that the dominant bourgeois ideology also belonged to them<sup>12</sup>.

Thus ideology focused on outward appearances and not on a real understanding of the essential. The abnormal became normal thanks to real games of prestige and through the fetishization<sup>13</sup> of the goods and markets in which they circulated (fetishization that gave them a disorienting status of sacredness).

Especially in more mature works<sup>14</sup>, Marx focused on the real capitalist procedures from which ideology came, rather than the distorted ideas of philosophers and ideologues. Understandably, one of the main missions of what later became known as "Marxism" was to unmask and demystify the dissimulatory nature of ideology. Critically exposing what the ideology would have laid bare, even the false aspirations of its proponents, establishing in their place a series of healthy social practices that constituted the empirical basis of true social conscience. From the Marxist approach emerges an image of ideology as the product of a number of primary causes: the need for accounts of the world around us that are simplified and easily traded; the desire of some individuals and groups to exercise power and control over others; the growing tendency of fragmentation of human activity into separate compartments - the division of labor - and of reciprocal distancing between thought and action. Ideology reinforces this by keeping societies in a state of suffering and ignorance. Marxism recognized considerable power for ideas, which presented themselves in the form of ideology. But, according to Marx, such concentrated power was wrong, since it constituted an obstacle to the possibility of man's emancipation.

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<sup>12</sup> An exploited worker really believed it was a good idea to wake up in the morning and work 14 hours in a row in the factory of his employer in exchange for poverty, because he had internalized the ideological view that such a dehumanizing work was inevitably part of the order industrial, which constituted for its part an act of free will, that the markets offered all the same opportunities and that earning a living by renting to others their own workforce was fundamental to their sense of dignity.

<sup>13</sup> "The relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation of objects which exists outside them.... It is a particular social relation between men themselves which in their eyes assumes a phantasmagorical form of a relation between things. ... This is what I call fetishism; it attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and it is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities". K. Marx, *The capital*, Intr. M. Dobb, Ed. Einaudi, Torino 1975, vol. I, p. 72.

<sup>14</sup> In particular in the *Capital*.

The assumptions that make these arguments valid are different<sup>15</sup>:

- they depend on the fundamental distinction between true awareness and distorted or false beliefs. In order to affirm that our understanding of the political world is based on an illusion, we must be certain of the accessibility of non-illusory wisdom. Marx was convinced that the truth would have arisen once the distortions were removed; in other words, that human relationships and sincere materials were not only a natural condition obscured by social and ideological deformations, but also the scientifically announced result of future social development. The fact that the truth could be brought to light (certainly not discovered through revelation or intuition, in which Marx did not believe at all) in a definitive way, was a non-negotiable assumption;
- these arguments depend on the ephemeral nature of ideology. If it is a distortion, it will disappear as soon as real social relations are introduced. If we are dealing with the product of an unnatural and alienating division between material and spiritual, it will disappear when we recognize the material roots of what is spiritual. And if it consolidates the power relations between the ruling class and the dominated class, it will eclipse once these relations are transformed into a democratic sense of community and social equality. Therefore ideology is superfluous, it is a pathological product of the historical context and will vanish when it will improve;
- the Marxist conception of ideology has contributed to its unified understanding. If ideology is really a smokescreen that conceals reality, we will first get rid of it and it will be better. In particular, it makes no sense to examine it for what it is, nor to draw distinctions between different ideological variants: ideology is part of a superstructure devoid of intrinsic value, consequently any interest in nature and the mutations of this obscure curtain disappears. Marx's simian-messianic conviction, which ultimately would have prevailed in a socialist and not deformed society, meant that the defects of the present deserved blame, not analysis.

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<sup>15</sup> "This essay is not an endeavour of Marxological exegesis, but since I consider my self to work on the basis of historical materialism, a brief clarification of the relationship of my conception of ideology to that of Marx is called for. In Marx we may discern at least two different conceptions of ideology or the ideological. One of them is basically the same as that adopted here. Ideology is then seen as the medium through which men make their history as conscious actors". G. Therborn, *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology*, Verso Classic, 1999.

To assert that political practices or ideas are distorted, one must be sure that they have undistorted forms. But even if one were convinced of the present omnipresence of such distortions, a political scholar could argue convincingly that it is interesting social phenomena and that their analysis is necessary in case one wants to understand the nature of politics in society. existing.

When we dive into the smokescreen, that is, into the substance of ideology, we find both affinities and discrepancies: a complex and multifaceted world waiting to be discovered.

In short, the abstract category of Marx "ideology" is populated by a large number of concrete ideologies, and the traits they share provide insights of immense value in understanding political realities;

- another aspect of the unitary character of Marxist ideology is that the different ideologies are part of a single, not to say global, description of political reality. They represent the essential element that keeps a homogeneous world view cohesive, concealing its internal contradictions. This image of coordinated totality has prevailed for a long time in the representations of ideology, nourishing its inclusive nature and contributing to the obstinacy of some ideologues in considering such representations as infallible. One must realize that not only are such monolithic visions of the world, but possess a pervasive force. In his absence, to maintain the ideology in its place, physical coercion has become all too often necessary;

- the role of ideologues has been overrated. Although Marxist logic emphasizes the social origin of ideology, its epicenter has frequently proved to be much more circumscribed than an entire social class. The Marxist connection of ideology to power relations as well as to the manipulation of the masses has often led to the identification of a group of ideology professionals, and even to

the identification of the impact of single individuals<sup>16</sup>.

The ideologues can be considered intellectuals pervaded by a dangerous sense of mission: to be precise, of the mission of changing the world based on a specific absolute ideal.

This perspective involves a rather hierarchical view of the world, as well as suggesting that both production and the diffusion of intellectual goods constitute a monopoly.

Marxist class theory provides support for such opinions, although the intellectuals who appear in these theories sometimes act independently, less defined by their material bases than Marx believes. The connection of ideology with these intellectuals has also contributed to the widespread idea that ideologies are a priori, abstract and not empirical. This opinion is abundantly shared by modern politicians, the press and even by various scholars, especially in the English-speaking world, with its myth of empiricism, and in the German one, still greatly influenced by the vocabulary used by Marx.

It remains valid in the emphasis with which Marxism has advocated the unmasking of ideologies:

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<sup>16</sup> “Moreover, if the capitalist economy has its own built-in devices of deception - if, as Theodor Adorno somewhere remarks, ‘the commodity is its own ideology’ - what need is there for specifically ideological institutions at the level of the ‘super-structure’? Perhaps just to reinforce effects already endemic in the economy, but the answer is surely a little lame. Marx may well have discovered one potent source of false consciousness in bourgeois society; but whether this can be generalized to account for ideology as a whole is surely questionable. In what sense, for example, is this view of ideology tied up with class

struggle? The theory of commodity fetishism forges a dramatically immediate link between capitalist productive activity and human consciousness, between the economic and the experiential; but it does so, one might claim, only by short-circuiting the level of the specifically political. Are all social classes indifferently in the grip of commodity fetishism? Do workers, peasants and capitalists all share the same ideological universe, universally imprinted as they are by the material structures of capitalism? Marx’s case in the ‘Fetishism of Commodities’ chapter would seem to retain two dubious features from his earlier version of ideology: its empiricism, and its negativism. Capital appears to argue that our perception (or misperception) of reality is somehow already immanent in reality itself; and this belief, that the real already contains the knowledge or mis-knowledge of itself, is arguably an empiricist doctrine. What it suppresses is precisely the business of what human agents make, variably and conflictively, of these material mechanisms - of how they discursively construct and interpret them in accordance with particular interests and beliefs”. T. Eagleton, *Ideology: An introduction*, Verso, University of Michigan 1991.



- the importance assumed by the social and historical context in the genesis of political ideas. By now we consider a truism the concept that people are basically the product of the environment they come from, although there are still considerable debates about the relative weight of environmental, genetic and individual attitudes of choice. Lightened by the Marxist baggage, ideas and ideologies are considered the product of groups. They are also part of the cultural milieu that shapes our activities and is in turn modeled;
- the value of ideas. Marx may also have seen in the domain exercised by ideology in his epoch a delusional illusion, but even such a framework implies that ideas are not pure rhetoric: if ideas present themselves not only as truth, but in such authoritarian garments as those of an ideology, they must be considered with the utmost seriousness and must be given an even more central role than Marx himself;
- ideologies are endowed with crucial political functions: they give order to the social world, direct it to certain activities, legitimize or delegitimize its practices. Ideologies exercise power, if only through the creation of a structure within which decisions can be made and give them meaning. This power must not necessarily be based on exploitation and dehumanization, but at this point only a few anarchists would come to the point of claiming that it can be done without power, even limited to its function as an authoritative phenomenon;
- the Marxist method has handed down an idea that is of considerable importance also for non-Marxists: it is simply a matter of the fact that reality is not always the one suggested by appearances. If we want to understand ideologies, we must accept the fact that they contain levels of meaning hidden from those who use them and, often, even those who create them. The study of ideology, therefore, largely includes - though certainly not entirely - the enterprise of decoding and identification of structures, contexts and motives not easily perceived, and above all the clarification of the morphology of ideologies, or how they are formed, what exactly are they, how they work, what they are composed of.

The first key point, in this regard, is the principle that ideologies are forms of political thought, which allow a privileged access to the understanding of the nature of political theory, showing its variety and subtlety; the thought encapsulated in ideologies deserves an examination as such and not only for what it hides: it must not be considered a weakened and inferior version of analytical or normative philosophical theories. Therefore, some groundless presuppositions are removed, which on the one hand believe that ideologies are

mutually exclusive systems of ideas and, on the other, that there is a two-way relationship between an ideology and a specific political movement. Rather, it becomes especially important to distinguish ideology from what is considered its authoritative counterpart, political philosophy.

There seems to be a watershed between philosophy as a reflective activity and ideology understood as a combination of genuinely conscious beliefs, unconscious assumptions and dissembling rhetorical assertions. But, in reality, the choice is not between the mask and the face, because both tell complementary stories: we can't do without one or the other. Ideologies, as real practices of a political thought, mix and balance various concepts. What matters is not to ask oneself if there is a combination, but rather, what is the range of the different possible conceptual combinations that ideologies produce? Continuing to consider mutually exclusive political philosophy and ideology, the only result will be an artificial and imperfect order, which will devalue some ideologies by denying their philosophical attributes and impoverish some political philosophies by disavowing their ideological characteristics.

In the light of these analytical preliminaries, we can deduce that the concept of ideology can be understood and studied "considering concrete ideologies as emerging from peculiar configurations of political concepts"<sup>17</sup>.

### *The hermeneutical approach*

Precisely by exploring the morphology of political concepts, against the background of Wittgenstein's references, Merleau-Ponty, the psychology of

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<sup>17</sup> M. Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1996, trad. it. *Ideologie e teoria politica*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2000, pag. 64.

talt, until the postmodernism of Lyotard and Derrida<sup>18</sup>, it is possible to arrive at a precise separation between the point of view of the ideologist and that of ideology analyst. Proceeding through an approach that is influenced by Saussure linguistics, one comes to consider the constitutive elements of political thought as political concepts, expressed through terms such as freedom, justice, power, rights. Ideologies are complex constructions, through which particular meanings, derived from a universe of meanings, are applied to the wide range of political concepts to which they inevitably recur. But while the sentence structure is governed by strict grammatical rules, the morphology of political concepts is capable of a great deal of variation because there are an infinite number of ways in which meaningful components can bind to one another. In this regard, it is appropriate that the morphological arrangements of cultural and socio-moral concepts are considered both on the basis of their origins and on their consequences as sources of meaning. This implies raising the question of the role of history in the analysis of ideology and, in parallel, of the role of

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<sup>18</sup> Jacques Derrida and his progeny are primarily interested in the sliding of the Mallarmean signifier, rather than in what gets said during the tea-break in the Hilton kitchens. In the case of Tel Quel, a starry-eyed Western view of the Maoist 'cultural revolution' is naively transplanted to the arena of language, so that political revolution becomes implicitly equated with some ceaseless disruption and overturning. The case betrays an anarchistic suspicion of institutionality as such, and ignores the extent to which a certain provisional stability of identity is essential not only for psychical well-being but for revolutionary political agency. It contains no adequate theory of such agency, since the subject would now seem no more than the decentred effect of the semiotic process; and its valuable attention to the split, precarious, pluralistic nature of all identity slides at its worst into an irresponsible hymning of the virtues of schizophrenia. Political revolution becomes, in effect, equivalent to carnivalesque delirium; and if this usefully reinstates those pleasurable, Utopian, mind-shattering aspects of the process which a puritanical Marxism has too frequently suppressed, it leaves those comrades drearily enamoured of 'closure' to do the committee work, photocopy the leaflets and organize the food supplies. What is enduringly valuable about the case is its attempt to uncover the linguistic and psycho-analytic mechanisms of ideological representation - to expose ideology less as some static 'set of ideas' than as a set of complex effects internal to discourse. Ideology is one crucial way in which the human subject strives to 'suture' contradictions which rive it in its very being, constitute it to its core. As with Althusser, it is what produces us as social subjects in the first place, not simply a conceptual straightjacket into which we are subsequently bound. T. Eagleton, *Ideology: An introduction*, Verso, University of Michigan 1991.

hermeneutics, which can be traced using the classic searches of Ricoeur and Gadamer.

Between the two positions there are differences regarding the relative ability of the interpreter to free himself from the constraints of history. Ricoeur hopes in an emancipation from the text oriented to the future, while Gadamer is turned backwards and has a cumulative perspective. The analysis of ideologies should deviate slightly from both points of view: it is necessary to take into account both the context and subjectivism. Change, therefore, is not only incorporated into the different historical perspectives that hermeneutics applies to an event of the past, but in the multiple meanings introduced by a large number of contemporary ideological producers when they structure what they believe, or pretend it is, the same ideology.

Within this school, however, the divergent emphasis on some aspects implies different consequences for ideological analysis. Ricoeur, in particular, was instrumental in associating hermeneutical interpretation with the study of ideologies. Assuming that the polysemy of words is the essential problem facing the understanding of ideas, it highlights the selective role of contexts in determining the current value that words take in a given message. For Ricoeur, the challenge of hermeneutics is to recognize the relatively unequivocal message that the speaker has generated from the polysemic basis of the vocabulary used. The question of the problem, however, is not conducted on the micro level of morphological control, but descending on a unit identified as "text", Ricoeur deviates the exploration of ideologies in a circumscribed context. The text is approached as a block of meaning, to be absorbed in its entirety, as a block capable of independent existence. The hermeneutical challenge consists in overcoming the difference between text and comprehension which is the consequence of the triple removal: of the author, of the socio-cultural decontextualization and of the original addressee. Since a text is subject, as Ricoeur sees it, to "an unlimited series of readings", the text is emancipated from its initial environment and re-contextualized through multiple readings.

The conclusion, it should be noted, is strongly delimited by the hermeneutical enterprise, since Ricoeur (based on Dilthey and Schleiermacher) considers this turning point in understanding not as the possibility of discovering an intention hidden behind the text, but of unfolding a world before it. -to use the potential embedded in the text to re-establish itself through these externally induced

imaginative variations, and to develop the path of thought open from the text. Ricoeur rejects Dilthey's goal of understanding the author "better than he understands himself". If ideological analysis were to proceed simply by replacing self-knowledge with the external decoding of the references that are presumed to be unknown to their authors, this method would be truly incomplete. Self-definition must merge with the empirically determinable criteria imposed by the analyst. Neither the discovery of the unconscious as a primary factor in linguistic expression should in any way worsen the state of consciousness. However, some difficulties emerge with Ricoeur's position. The text as "an object without life and without author"<sup>19</sup> does not correspond directly to an ideological system for at least the following two reasons: first, ideologies are by their very nature oriented towards a particular political and social situation, even if not the one in which they saw the light for the first time. Consumers of an ideology are not able to see it as a detached text because they attribute to it social worlds and secondary authors, however unrealistic or inaccurate they may be. Ideologies, unlike texts, are already absorbed as partially decontextualized packages. They are transmitted and consumed by groups whose perceptions can impose new interpretative rules on those ideologies, which in turn must be integrated into hereditary rules of interpretation incorporated into existing ideological schemes. Ideologies are not in themselves the beginning of the process of interpretation, but are positioned at an advanced point in that circular process. No reader is in this sense "free" to do what she or he wants because of the cultural bonds that operate on ideological interpretation, and because ideologies have groups both as subjects and as objects. Secondly, the visualization of the text as an unalterable palimpsest detaches it from the mutational foundation which is an important constituent of all ideologies.

It would negate the malleability and fluidity of internal relations that characterize each ideological family. While the text as a model of words remains an objective constant, all ideologies - because they are constructed by many texts - are in a continuous process of reformulation. Although large patterns remain identifiable and change imperceptibly for relatively long periods, the forcing of an ideology into a text, or a single list of principles, will constitute an arbitrary view of its temporal totality. The moment of interpretation, even if

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<sup>19</sup> P. Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. J. B. Thompson, Cambridge 1981, p. 152.

found over time, is also a function of time, a product of the temporal transmission of meaning.

Starting from this last aspect, the reflection of Gadamer develops, even if it encounters difficulties of an opposite nature. Moving away from epistemology and returning to the questions of ontology, Gadamer asks the question: "what is the way of being of that being that exists only in understanding?"<sup>20</sup>. Responding to this famous phrase, Gadamer refers to the "conversation that we ourselves are"<sup>21</sup>. Significantly, Gadamer sets the understanding in a public rather than a private context, a structure in which individuals are assimilated by the historical process, instead of predicting it. Here is an instrument that apparently can be applied to ideological analysis, with its emphasis on public political domain. Gadamer's preoccupation with the historical dimension is central to his work. Contrary to the discomfort warned by Skinner<sup>22</sup> with tradition, understood as a reified artificialization superimposed on the historical process, Gadamer sees human beings as present within the traditions as part of themselves. The essence of understanding involves placing oneself within a tradition. He rejects that historical method that requires a liberation from the scholars' prejudices to correctly experiment a historical moment, just as it rejects the necessity of historical distance as a precondition of understanding. He specifically identifies as constraints in thinking those "prejudices and precursors" given within the common tradition that binds the interpreter and the object of interpretation.

While the morphological approach holds that the meaning is largely a function of the vast combination of options between the concepts constituting an ideology, Gadamer focuses instead on the infinite variations of meaning that derive from the different temporal points from which the interpreted text is observed. Since we ourselves are constituted by the same traditions in which we operate and think, we will share fundamental prejudices with those traditions. But distance in time is not something that must be overcome, as Gadamer states,

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<sup>20</sup> H. G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, London 1979, p. 54.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 340.

<sup>22</sup> Q. Skinner, *Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas*, History and Theory, 8 (1969), 3-53. Through the emphasis given to the context and the recovery of meaning, Skinner has revitalized the nature of ideological research. However, the heart of his enterprise diverges from the field of action that an ideology analyst could more effectively. An essential feature of his approach is the fact that he is not overly committed to maintaining the distinction between political theory and ideology. "We can hardly argue that we are dealing with the history of political theory if we are not willing to write it as a real story, that is, as the recording of a real activity, particularly as the history of ideologies."

"it is not an abyss that yawns, but is full of the continuity of customs and traditions<sup>23</sup>" that completely reveals the true meaning of the object. At the end two horizons appear: one the applicant's horizon and the other that of the particular historical situation in which the researcher arises. These two will necessarily merge, although the final product changes continuously, and the tension between the two horizons remains a major factor in the process of understanding. Moreover, although the possibility of truth in understanding is open, "the discovery of the true meaning of a text or a work of art is never finished, it is in fact an infinite process<sup>24</sup>". However, compared to Skinner, the question of tradition is complex. Traditions can be used by ideological actors as a metastorical device, while the scholar is committed to discovering empirically connected continuities, as well as discontinuities, of a different nature. Concrete traditions are often much more fragmented series of highlighted periods and unexplored spaces that ideologies cement together. The choice of cement can itself become central to the reconstructive hermeneutical enterprise. This exercise of choice, however, is fundamental for the analysis of ideologies, while at the same time it must strike a note of caution for the scholar who tries to emulate the ideological practice rather than maintaining awareness of the possible rigidity and artificiality of traditional structures .

While in the hermeneutic project the text is constant and the interpretations are endless, some analysts of ideology reverse this position: the "text" is fluid, expressed by many creators within a given family, while the interpretation is often connected to a particular temporal manifestation of an ideology and tries to provide a lasting understanding, if not completely finished, and to build an ideological profile. This temporal arbitrariness is faced with the continuous historical flow of an ideology, but there are extenuating circumstances that may justify it, and not all of them concern the impossibility of the task or the defective perspectives and the skill of the experimenter. Indeed, particular historical moments, distinct from the possible ones, may have had a special significance in determining the dominant meanings of political concepts that comprise an ideology.

Hermeneutics has three characteristics to offer to the scholar of ideologies. First of all, it makes aware the prejudices that govern our understanding, so that a more balanced assessment of a text is possible. This avoids the difficulty of

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<sup>23</sup> H. G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, London 1979, 263.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 264.

being trapped in the hypotheses that the text gives us, and is essential for the aspect of the "decryption" of the ideological analysis. Gadamer rightly stresses that "we can't avoid thinking about what has been accepted without doubt and therefore not thought, by an author, and bringing it into the opening of the question<sup>25</sup>". This brings us beyond intentionality to another level of interpretation that must characterize the study of ideologies. The hermeneutical position contrary to the Marxist view of ideology reinforces the thesis that the ideological unconsciousness in the transmission of messages is not necessarily false consciousness. The tension between intentionality and non-intentionality must be seen as a permanent feature in a world of multiple meanings, only some of which the author can master, and only some of which can be learned by a particular interpreter or consumer. Meaning will always work before the synchronic study of language, and this indeterminacy is also the key to human choice. Secondly, this problem of choice is what Gadamer means by saying that "the essence of the demand is the openness and the holding of possibilities<sup>26</sup>". Recognition of the range and plasticity of experience and understanding is essential for attempts to acquire knowledge. From this point of view the existence of ideologies is not a repressive weight on the human mind, as it is often depicted, but a manifestation of the infinite variety of political imagination. Thirdly, the temptation of understanding is underlined by the awareness of one's own historicity. History is part of the process of understanding. Understanding is therefore always interpretation and does not have constant reference points. There are variations between the position of Gadamer and Ricoeur compared to the relative ability of the interpreter to throw the chains of history. Ricoeur hopes for a direct emancipation of the text from the future, while Gadamer is backward and cumulative in his perspective. Furthermore, Ricoeur sees the consequence of the hermeneutical method as a benefit to the interpreter as an actor in the historical process. It speaks of a highly personalized hermeneutic experience, which culminates in a 'self-enlargement through the appropriation of the proposed worlds that interpretation plays'<sup>27</sup>. This could also be the case, but ideological analysis is also an academic activity that sees the critical observer as a provider of reflective and evaluative knowledge that is distinct from the knowledge that he or she will produce as a producer of ideologies. The hermeneutical enterprise tends to overemphasize

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<sup>25</sup> H. G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, London 1979, 264.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 265.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 94.



the analyst's position in the middle of the material studied, at the expense of those characteristics of the material that can reasonably be detached from the subjectivism of a particular observer. The vision of the ideological analysis pursued here differs slightly from both these points of view. The phenomena of context and subjectivism must be involved; neither of them should obscure the other. We must optimistically think of the possibility of identifying models of political thought, as bound by the horizons of our interpretative vision and the possibility of approximating the terms of Mannheim<sup>28</sup> - to attain relative generalizations (if not relative truths), assertions of meaning that are a mixture factual knowledge and enlightened, deliberative and cultural understandings. Moreover, instead of contending with a fixed text, an unaltered configuration of words, we should think in terms of the structural nature of the ideological "text" as a system of ideas flexibly linked, open not only to constant reinterpretation but, because ideologies are formed through group activity, to the constant reaffirmation of their authors in any place and time. In this way we can also avoid the accusations of incorporated conservatism to which some varieties of hermeneutics have been prey. At the same time, care must be taken not to fall into another hermeneutical trap, that is, an exaggerated deconstruction of the text, in the sense of looking beyond the text (for example, power structures), rather than looking closer the text.

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<sup>28</sup> Mannheim elaborates an analysis of the concept of ideology, focusing on the following distinction: that between a particular conception and a total conception of ideology. The particular conception of ideology concerns the fact that a subject abandons himself to more or less deliberate counterfeits of a real situation, to the exact knowledge of which he would contrast his particular interests. These deformations are manifested in every way, in the form of conscious or semi-conscious lies, of deception calculated towards others, or of self-delusions. The particular conception of ideology indicates a phenomenon that lies between mere lie, on the one hand, and the error derived from a deformed conceptual apparatus, on the other. It refers to a sphere of psychological errors, which are not intentional in spite of everything, but inevitably follow certain causal determinants. It is therefore a conception that confines itself to affirming that this or that particular interest is the cause of a certain deceptive attitude. The total conception of ideology concerns instead the *Weltanschauung* of an age or of a historical-social group that invests the entire cognitive experience of a subject that belongs to that age or group. It believes that there is a correspondence between a certain social situation and a specific perspective, opinion or collective consciousness. K. Mannheim, *Ideology and utopy*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1957, p. 67-68.

### *Conclusions*

Through this brief analysis it can be said that ideologies are not, as critics of ideology argue, a specifically irrational, arid or imperfectly reflective way of managing moral choices, normative principles or even truth. This would evaluate them on the basis of a standard that simply does not exist in any form of political thought. The main characteristic of ideologies is the morphological act of decontextation, to privilege among the options, to accept or exclude paradigms that interpret political reality, to compete on legitimate meanings assigned to political language, not to declare true or false political values, but on what conceptual combinations are available to be applied to the understanding and formation of the political world. Ideology is one of the most basic political phenomena, an activity carried out with concepts and with language, which traces the parameters of individual and group behavior. Its uniqueness would not be sufficiently appreciated by examining its contents simply as catalogs of preference, or by evaluating the quality of its arguments. Its most complete meaning is recognized instead by an understanding of the methods through which its conceptual configurations are formed. Ideology is the product of the organization of information, perceptions, beliefs, pre-judgments and misunderstandings on the political world, a task made necessary by the attributes of language, knowledge and human understanding. These concern centrally the indeterminacy, the decision-making process, the individual and the social need of the decisions and the malleability of the concepts modeled between the two constraints of the logic and of the cultural constructs located in space and time. The deepening of these issues is obtained by analyzing the internal structures of ideologies, their permutations, the reasons for these morphological characteristics and their political consequences. An ideological utterance, in addition to a complete ideological system, can't be entirely explained as a reflection of cultural events, spatial and temporal, or as a predictable epistemological response to such events. Nor is it to be explained entirely as a grammar or internal morphology supported by logical or functional connections, independent of its consumers. On the other hand, the interaction between these variable factors and their illumination should be sought through the optimization of the interpretive perspectives without following every single point of view. The hermeneutic conceptions of time, space and horizons; the relationships between texts, their producers and their consumers; the role of political language in the construction of reality and in providing access to the

world out there; unconscious surplus of meaning; essential contestability and indeterminacy; the notion of family similarities - all this is useful to the mill that analyzes ideologies, discovering the networks of conceptual components that make better what they are and suggest what they can be. If we want to understand ideologies, we must analyze them as widely supported systems of political beliefs, speaking in familiar languages, or accessible to most members of a society. Alluding to a mixture of rational and non-rational is to refer to the practices of thinking with which societies are aware, in which the decontamination undertaken at least in part on the basis of emotional arguments or socially inherited beliefs overcomes the challenge. Reason and logic are important components of political language, but so are social invocations of right and wrong norms, of sense and common sense, of self-evidence, of accepted linguistic use.

So they are the social complaints of all these, but to a lesser extent, since challenging them radically is always an uphill struggle. Understanding of ideologies therefore requires a different approach to the method, recognizing them as attempts to provide their own reasons for a legitimate decontestation, through the cultural restriction of meaning - the decision in or out of certain ideas, concepts and expressions. A corollary of this is an exploration of the ways in which ideologies permeate popular discourse and mass media.

The elaboration presented recognizes the diversity and possibilities of endemic change in ideological morphology. There is no intrinsic justification for approving what is, knowing that it is only one of an indeterminate range of conceptual options. Rather, the resulting pluralism of ideological expression is both an opportunity and an obstacle. He challenges the prevailing limits and methods of making sense of ideologies, comments the absence of a touchstone to end the rivalry between the contested political ideas that societies face and testify to the unfailing fertility of human political imagination. Ideologies can be structures of power that manipulate human action, but they are also conceptional systems that allow us to choose to become what we want to become.

Ideology can be present in all systems of political beliefs, but it is not identical to the "system of political beliefs". If such belief systems are ideological, they are not just ideological. Ideology refers to a particular aspect of belief systems or - to the extent that a concept gives shape to reality - to a specific way of interpreting and decoding political reality, to constructing political practices as expressions of political and constitutive ideas, with the ultimate goal of

formulating a legitimate public policy. If one argues that a second result of this approach is to obscure the distinctions between ideological families, this accusation must be rejected. Ideologies can still be grouped into identifiable families, however plastic and open to their membership. The point is that, in their multiple metamorphoses, the differences between ideological families are incessantly accentuated or limited.

Thus, the scholar of ideologies is called to achieve a balance between three elements: the single ideologue endowed with exceptional creativity, the groups that supported him and from whom he drew the later creators of ideologies who used their multiple interpretations of that individual work to make their product more interesting. Therefore, ideologies become the sphere in which political theory as a discipline can find its *raison d'être*. In conclusion, it can be observed that ideologies can certainly be structures of power that manipulate human action, but they are also ideal systems that allow us to choose to become what we want to become. We do not want, however, to hypothesize that ideology is such a general concept that it lacks the capacity for differentiation: ideology can be present in all systems of political beliefs, but does not mean "system of political beliefs". Rather, ideology refers to a particular aspect of those systems or to a specific way of interpreting and decoding political reality.

Therefore, it appears that this particular current of study that wanted the era of ideologies as a land no longer fertile and destined for the sunset appears to have been overcome<sup>29</sup>. The thesis that the end of ideological conflicts, at least internally, would have taken place largely due to the accommodating nature of the liberal democratic political model seems not so obvious, thanks to the re-emergence of those tensions, as said both economic and of international politics, which may cast doubt on the ideological stability of this political model. Moreover, at the international level, in consideration of the war events that have inaugurated the new millennium, the influence of the ideological variable seems at least to a certain extent, despite the end of the conflict between the Western bloc and the Soviet bloc.

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<sup>29</sup> F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Free Press, New York 1992.

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